

FACILITATING SEXUAL HEALTH DISCUSSIONS IN PRIMARY CARE WITH OLDER AUSTRALIANS: HEALTH PRACTITIONERS' PERSPECTIVES

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Background: Sexual activity enhances physical and mental health during ageing. However, sexual health discussions are often omitted for older Australians, aged 60+, on the false presumption that they are not, or do not want to be, sexually active. Little research to date has explored further barriers or facilitators to such discussion from the health practitioner's perspective.

Methods: In this pilot study, semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face or by telephone with 15 general practitioners (GPs), 6 practice nurses (PNs), and 6 practice managers (PMs), purposively sampled from Victorian rural and urban clinics, plus 10 key informants experienced in either digital and online interventions, or sexual health. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically.

Results: While most GPs believed it was appropriate to discuss sexual health with patients, they did not routinely do so with older adults, unless it was relevant to the presenting complaint. GPs saw management of older patients' co-morbidities as a barrier to sexual health discussion, alongside embarrassment resulting from the GP and patient having discordant gender and/or age. Some PNs already initiated discussions in the context of Well Women's checks, 75+ health assessments, and chronic disease management plans, but saw GPs' lack of support and follow-up as a barrier. Most GPs and PMs believed that posters in the waiting room would increase the frequency and quality of sexual health discussions with older patients. Key informants believed digital and online interventions can provide a non-judgmental way for older patients to disclose information about sensitive topics such as sexual health.

Conclusions: While recognising its importance, few health practitioners initiated sexual health conversations with older people. Health practitioners offered a range of suggestions, including digital and online interventions, to normalise such discussions.

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